



Graham Wallace

Bransford Golf Club

# Wallace and done it ...



**Dark days and bright times have both run through the career of Graham Wallace, but 2017 marks a dual celebration for this lifelong greenkeeping professional. Greg Rhodes visits Bransford Golf Club, just a few miles west of Worcester and in the shadow of the beautiful Malvern Hills**

In the rush to build golf courses in the 1980s, few spotted that golf participation was not rising to the heights predicted when the floodgates opened. Fierce competition and the severe economic downturn in the late noughties proved too much for a clutch of courses that had failed to adapt to shifting market forces.

That might have proved the case for Bransford Golf Club and Bank House, the country house hotel linked with it, but the good times are back - the course is re-energised, members are happy, visitor numbers are rising and the hotel has newly

added a luxurious spa to build year-round business.

The transformation is due largely to the major investment that entrepreneur Peter Wood ploughed into the course and clubhouse after buying the estate lock, stock and barrel five years ago.

"It's a great story of a successful businessman reinvesting in his local area," remarks Course Manager Graham Wallace, who, this year, celebrates a decade at Bransford, while the course chalks up twenty-five years.

"I've seen ups and downs in that time," he continues, "but the last four years here have





A misty morning across one of the fourteen lakes on the course

seen an era of real growth and improvement," - a fitting tribute to a turnaround in fortunes that promises much for the future of this picturesque sport and leisure destination.

Resting in delightful Worcestershire countryside, the 18-hole parkland course is still maturing as its mix of deciduous saplings, planted when the course was constructed, lends character and challenge to the round.

Peter Wood's daughter Claire markets the hotel and hospitality side of the business, leaving everyday management of Bransford's holes to Graham.

Up to £0.5m has been pumped into provision indoors and out, Graham estimates, but the first priority was accommodating vehicles. "The car park was retarmaced because the surface had eroded. That too was a six-figure sum, then we bought new machinery - rough and semi-rough cutters, greens iron and tractors."

Improvements to the "aesthetics" proceeded apace too, as Wood introduced

double-glazing to the clubhouse and refurbished the changing rooms.

A proprietary club with some 370 active and involved members, Bransford is billed as a 'Florida-style' course. "Jo Farr, who constructed the course, played a heap of golf in the States and decided to name each of the holes after various US golf courses he played," Graham discloses.

He liked water too. "We have fourteen lakes and two island greens, so the Stateside connection is strong in that respect too," adds Graham. The course is also one of the few in the country to boast six par 3s, six par 4s and six par 5s.

"It's a challenging course suiting all levels of the game, from low handicaps to hotel guests here for their annual golf and spa break."

Golf suiting all ages and abilities ranks highly in Graham's priorities for how the game should develop. As a lifelong golfer himself playing off a handicap of 1, he holds strong views on how clubs can capitalise on modern trends. "They need to have the

facilities to attract the family so some members can enjoy relaxation and leisure, others can enjoy a round or just 9 holes if they wish. We have introduced 9-hole memberships for this reason."

As Bank House's visitor demographic shifts with the introduction of its spa provision, so too will that on Bransford's fairways. "We cater for the members, of course," Graham stresses, "as well as golf breaks and the steady corporate market." Society days are definitely on the rise, he reports - a sure sign that word has spread about the quality of facility indoors and out.

Transient business has changed dramatically too, one reason why clubs increasingly offer flexible memberships and golf packages, two for one deals and so on to suit a wide demographic, he explains.

Still only 48, Graham has spent his life in greenkeeping. Leaving school at sixteen, intending to go to college to train in the profession, he came up against the familiar Catch 22.

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Graham on the 7th tee - he plays off a handicap of 1



A 3-ball in the shadows of the Malvern Hills

experience at a course before you would be accepted at college. I remember writing to sixteen sites asking if they would take me on as an apprentice. They all refused.

His father was a member at Bakewell Golf Club 9-hole - a picturesque private members club in Derbyshire, and home of the renowned Bakewell tart.

Graham played golf there with his dad so took the plunge and begged them to take him on. "They agreed and I owe so much to them, particularly to then greens chairman

David Blakeway for showing such commitment."

That was in 1986. A year later, he was enrolled on a three-year national diploma course in Turf Science and Sportsground Management at Myerscough College. "The first year they ran the course," he recalls.

Notable greenkeeping posts followed these early days. After Bakewell, he landed at Gleneagles Hotel as an assistant preparing the new Nicklaus-designed course, nurturing the growing process, fertilising it and

"bringing the course on". Five years later, he had risen to become deputy head greenkeeper.

Westerwood came next - the Cumbernauld 18-hole Seve Ballesteros course that attracted Graham as its first manager. At just 24, he was heading a six-strong greens team.

"The experience I gained at Gleneagles was a major factor in being appointed to the Westerwood post," he says. "I hadn't been just cutting greens there. They had a full



Putting out under heavy skies

training and development programme in place at the time that was second to none. Gleneagles set me up for my career now."

He gives a reverential nod to the three men who he says more than any others, shaped his development - head greenkeepers Joseph Paulin, who now runs an agronomy consultancy, Ross Monahan, and Scott Fennick, the golf course and estates manager.

Graham continues his agronomy theme, countering continuing criticism of the discipline in some quarters. "We can all learn from each other," he states. "Agronomy is an extremely valuable tool. Some greenkeepers criticise the role of an agronomist partly because, if their club brings one in, it could be because the committee lacks confidence in the man running the course." That said though, he adds: "I have worked with good and bad ones."

Why does he not consult one himself? "Because the technical support from my longstanding products supplier is superb," he replies.

Working closely with the hotel proprietors, Graham has developed a one, three and five-year plan for Bransford, each one "subject to budgets", he notes. "You have to explain

your business and its benefits to the management, but even then, if the money is not available, they cannot commit funds."

"I've worked in hotels for 75% to 85% of my career and the financial management of them is not as straightforward as it is in private member golf clubs. Hotels adopt a personal style of management - they have personnel stability and treat you as equals.",

"Private members club committees can change every three years and there is usually an age difference. Also, frustrations can arise when management changes occur."

Playing courses regularly himself, Graham sees both sides of the player/greenkeeper dynamic. In a recent championship held by brewer Greene King, he and his partner came a commendable fourth. However, "the first three won an all-expenses paid golfing trip to Portugal, so I'm a little disappointed to say the least," he confesses.

Worcestershire county captaincy at first and second team levels has proven "far more fulfilling" for him though, he adds.

The appliance of soil science looms large in Graham's worldview of his profession. "A huge amount of science has entered greenkeeping to help us improve course presentation and conditions," he says. A

BIGGA member for twenty-seven years, he knows the value of CPD in career development and raising personal knowledge of his profession.

"I like to visit BTME every couple of years, not only for the extensive 'Continue to Learn' seminar programme, but also because of the value of the event in interacting with professional colleagues."

"Talking over dinner, greenkeepers discuss their own issues and can give you a clue as to how you can solve yours. That's of inestimable value and I like to combine both. Although, in one sense, clubs are in competition with each other for members, greenkeepers are happy to talk about how their solutions can help others. We all work in different climates and different growing conditions. Mine's sand, his may be clay. Greenkeeping is a science, but not an exact one."

Part of Graham's maintenance programme is a consequence of in-built faults in the course make-up, Graham explains. "The golf boom of the 1980s saw farmers diversifying their land, but construction techniques and procedures were compromised through costs and the pressure to complete. That legacy is unwinding now." A damning indictment, you

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Young trees do not yet pose any problems



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may say, but a painfully familiar story across Britain, you suspect.

Marking the club's quarter century is Bransford's first-ever Pro/Am event. The Bank House Tournament will run with the Worcestershire PGA on the final Sunday in August. "We'll set up the course on the Saturday, cutting fairways and rough. We don't have enough staff to complete everything in one day," says Graham. "On the day, we'll be changing holes, moving tee markers, raking bunkers and cutting greens,

collars and approaches."

Graham and his full team of five work Monday to Friday, leaving a skeleton staff to set up the course at weekends. He had just lost a greenkeeper and was awaiting a replacement when I spoke to him. "It's unusual for someone to leave as most of the team have been at Bransford since before the buyout so, like me, they have lived through the bad times and good."

That new team member will receive the usual day's induction, which includes

standard internal training, health and safety procedures, risk assessment, a rundown of the hotel facilities and the pro shop.

Graham favours apprenticeships, as does Peter Wood, "but, so far, we have not had the opportunity to take any on because staff turnover is not massive" he says. "Apprenticeship schemes work quite flexibly and it's our serious intention to go this route."

The diehards who survived the perilous days of uncertainty five years ago, before



With fourteen lakes in all, water shortages are rare!

Wood bought the estate, are Graham's right hand men.

Alan Jones, golf course mechanic, in his eighth year here, undertakes all maintenance and machinery repairs. "We only put out specialist work, like fuel injection systems and grinding," Graham explains.

Assistant greenkeeper Dan Brown (no, not that one!), has been on the books for five years. He's on NVQ Level 2 year 1 at Warwickshire College and deputises for Graham on some tasks. "I'm qualified in spraying but, when I'm away, I need another qualified sprayer and, when Dan has qualified, he can step into my shoes."

Graham has high hopes for Dan. "He came in as a greenkeeper - keen and eager to progress - so we're giving him his chance to do just that."

Tree work falls to assistant greenkeeper Ryan Taylor, who has a chainsaw qualification, whilst fellow assistant greenkeeper Dan Moore is a man for all seasons, taking on pretty much any task, including an element of irrigation maintenance that's dear to Graham's heart. "I'm passionate about irrigation, it's my first love," he reveals, "so do a lot of it myself. We have a small wall-mounted controller system

at the moment, but we need to look at a PC-based one in the next three or four years."

"Grass needs water to live, but you do not need to water a green to make it soft, and overwatering can prove far more detrimental to the course, creating shallow, weak-rooted grasses, which dry off, then require watering again - a vicious circle. Controlled, sensible application and irrigation is the way, whilst data from weather forecasts can pre-empt things."

With fourteen lakes in all, Bransford is not short of a drop of water. The club has rights to abstract up to 55,000 gallons annually just in case they need topping up. Water pumped into the large holding lake by the side of the first fairway is then pumped to the irrigation system before passing to the other lakes.

Plans are afoot to install an aerator for the first lake to agitate and oxygenate the water used on the course.

"Mainly carp populate the lakes now as we believe other species were stolen some time ago," says Graham. "Moorhens and ducks swim among the rushes and reeds and we enjoy our Canada geese, but they have to be managed."

"Predatory scaring" is the solution, employing a rather quirky-looking

"environmentally safe" piece of kit called a Goosinator. "When you attract a flock of up to 200 of the geese onto the fairway, you have a problem, what with their droppings and everything - limiting numbers to ten or eleven is far more pleasant all round."

Although a parkland course, fairways and greens are not overly sheltered by trees. Most of the stock was planted as saplings when the course was constructed, so they are only twenty-five years old and still developing. "Some mature oaks line the course," says Graham, "and heavy woodland borders the estate boundary."

"Most of our tree stock is deciduous - beech, silver birch, cherry, rowan, ash and oak mostly. The cherry blossom is lovely when in flower and the fruit is picked by the hotel staff to use in dishes."

Bransford cannot escape the usual problem of autumn leaf fall, but this year the job will be made that much less labour intensive. "The blower we bought recently will allow us to clear leaves into the undergrowth and the difference in presentation will be massive," Graham notes with relish.

Tree overhang can encourage disease outbreaks as many know only too well, but

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The Bransford team l-r: Alan Jones, Ryan Taylor, Graham Wallace, Dan Brown and Dan Moore



Mature trees comprise beech, silver birch, cherry, rowan, ash and oak

Graham is sanguine about managing this thorn in greenkeepers' sides.

"Spores of fungal disease are ever-present in the atmosphere, turf and rootzone. It depends when conditions are right for disease to take hold. If the grass plant is under stress, such as when cut very low on greens, or there is insufficient food, the plant is more vulnerable to attack. Correct management techniques, however, ensure the chance of outbreaks is reduced."

"I'm proud to say that we only spray twice

a year - late September and October and late October to November - on a preventative basis. When I came here, it was six or seven times annually."

Bransford welcomes golfers throughout the year, including Christmas Day, although, as Graham notes: "If members want to play they can but, in my years here, I can remember just one person doing so. We tend not to work on the 25th, but are happy to work New Year."

"The par 3s receive a heavy battering in

winter, including the signature 15th, and we have three temporary tees when needed. It's my practice not to use winter greens. I'm happy for members to play on white frost. We have found, over the last few years, that little damage has been done from golf balls or feet and issues only arise when the top two or three inches thaw whilst deeper down is still frozen. Then root shear is the problem."

But winters have changed, he says. "No longer are we struck with weeks of frost. We





'Weather' is 90% of Graham's job

were cutting greens almost daily through last January - a combination of climate change and demand."

It's not so much frost as weather generally that can consume greenkeepers' thoughts. "Weather is 90% of my job," Graham states. "Failure to receive the right amount of sun, heat, light, water and oxygen means we cannot do the job, no matter how proficient we are."

"Weather patterns are so important today and dictate our maintenance programmes. Major aeration is undertaken in the early part of the year and we watch weather patterns and rainfall. For instance, experience tells me we receive 10-12 days of fine weather in March, so we take advantage of that to complete essential maintenance. April always goes cold into early May, so we need to do what's needed in that window of warmth. If we miss it, the grass plant doesn't grow."

Maintenance practices have shifted as climate change has taken root across the country. "I never dreamt we'd be scarifying in February. The timing of processes has changed dramatically."

"The north/south weather divide is very real. The south and Ireland are certainly warmer but, over my years in greenkeeping,

I've noticed how weather patterns are changing. The movement of the Jet Stream means we can experience four seasons in a single day. That's why data collection on weather is becoming ever more important in managing turf. It's huge now and formulates our programmes."

The team retains site-specific rainfall and temperature data and receives a weather blog every Monday morning as part of that process, Graham adds, but it can take three to five years for patterns to crystallise.

"The only thing we can control is the quantity of water we apply to the course. Too many uncontrollables and everything is affected."

We turn to greens maintenance - the bane of many a greenkeeper's working life. "Plenty have lost their job trying to provide the perfect putting surface," Graham notes. "Expectations are so high now and members are growing more knowledgeable as they have more access to information."

"We need to provide a surface, members and visitors want a smooth green. Poa and bent mixes predominate in the sandy soil and it would be lovely to have rye and fescues too but, given our time constraints, I believe we have reached a serviceable result."

"Many greenkeepers strive for perfection in greens and it causes a load of hassle for them. Correct maintenance procedures will encourage better grasses."

I'm a little surprised by this seemingly laissez faire stance - then Graham plays his trump card. "My partner was a greenkeeper here before she gave birth to Paddy, so I speak to her about green issues - she's very helpful."

Members can come in pretty handy too, he says. "The community of members we have here is really nice - mixed age ranges and no status issue. They are local people living within a twenty mile catchment."

Graham keeps them fully informed about his intentions on course, as well as attending monthly committee meetings to update club management on the course maintenance programme.

"Their attitude is markedly different to some private members clubs. Hotel members are more accepting and these are the best set of members I have ever known. They are complimentary and speak in a constructive manner. I make it clear that if they want to know anything all they have to do is ask me."

That policy paid dividends recently,

When we punched 30,000 holes in the 14th green, 12-13 inches deep to improve drainage, fourteen members chipped in to help fill every one individually with dried sand



Members filling after drilling



Four year old Paddy. Will he continue the dynasty at Bransford?

### What's in the shed?

John Deere 2500A greens mowers x 3  
 John Deere 220 pedestrian greens mowers x 2  
 John Deere 7400 rotary triple mower  
 John Deere 1600 WAM  
 John Deere ProGator  
 Sprayer  
 Topdresser  
 John Deere 3720 tractors x 2  
 Charterhouse Verti-Drain  
 Stihl brushcutters x 3  
 Makita backpack blower  
 Greens iron  
 Fertiliser spreader  
 Makita chainsaw  
 Fairway slitter

Graham recalls. "When we punched 20,000 to 30,000 holes in the 14th green, 12-13 inches deep to improve drainage, fourteen members chipped in to help fill every one individually with dried sand. We finished that green in a day, thanks to their help; half the time if only us had worked on it."

A monumental effort certainly and unusual among private clubs where members can be critical indeed of every stroke of work undertaken out on course.

The process formed part of the continuing programme of improving greens drainage. In the last three years, the team has completed fourteen of the eighteen greens. "Another will be done this winter," Graham says.

"The issue is that they suffered from poor construction; either we could have drained them, dug them up and relaid them or undertaken in-house deep aeration, so chose the last option."

Like his father before him, Graham is

already preparing his four-year-old son Paddy for the joys of golf. "It was playing the game with my dad that got me into it, so I hope Paddy will follow suit." If he also follows dad into greenkeeping, the Bransford dynasty will be established.

